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DURHAM, N.H. – Although their tufted ears and charming spots belie their ferocity, bobcats put the "wild" into wildcat.

Now, as sightings of these elusive creatures become more common in New Hampshire, researchers at the University of New Hampshire – home of the Wildcats – are working to understand them better. UNH professor of wildlife ecology John Litvaitis leads a team of UNH scientists that has partnered with New Hampshire Fish & Game Department on a four-year study to learn how many bobcats the state has and where they're roaming.

"It's an animal that a lot of people are very surprised to find out still exists in any abundance in the state," says Litvaitis. Bobcats were hunted (often with dogs) or trapped in New Hampshire – mostly with a bounty paid – until the season closed entirely in 1989. After two decades of protection, Litvaitis says, it seems that the bobcat is back.

UNH graduate student Derek Broman with the first collared bobcat of the study, a 30-pound male captured Nov. 22, 2009 in Gilsum. Credit: Greg Elizondo.

UNH Bobcat Research from UNH Video.

Found throughout the continental United States, bobcats are about twice as large as domestic cats and sport a characteristic stubby tail. The carnivorous predators live about six to eight years and have few natural predators other than humans. Bobcats, along with the much rarer Canada lynx, comprise the generic category "wildcats".

The researchers are using several methods to learn about the abundance, health and habits of bobcats, focusing their research on a 20-mile radius around Keene. In the most hands-on method, Litvaitis and a team that includes Derek Broman, a master's student in wildlife ecology, enlisted local trappers (hired by N.H. Fish & Game) in the state's southwest corner – an area whose rocky outcroppings and rugged geography have long harbored a significant bobcat population – to trap 12 bobcats during the past several months for detailed study.

Each animal was weighed, measured and examined to determine its overall health; the largest in the study was a 38-pound male. Researchers took small tissue samples that will yield valuable DNA information then outfitted each bobcat with a radio collar that uses GPS technology to track the animals' movements. One use for this GPS data, says Litvaitis, will be to begin to identify corridors along which bobcats generally travel. "We need to start thinking about more connections between the areas we've already protected," he says.

In addition to the labor-intensive trapping and collaring of select animals, researchers aim to estimate their abundance with less direct methods. At the end of March, taking advantage of the early snow melt, Litvaitis led a dozen undergraduates to the Keene area to collect bobcat droppings, or scat, which yields each animal's unique DNA. From that data and existing data, he says, researchers can extrapolate population numbers. The research team is also extrapolating population density from images of bobcats

caught by remotely triggered cameras set up on known bobcat paths.

Litvaitis, who has studied bobcats since he was a graduate student at the University of Maine in the early 1980s, says that the resurgence of bobcats in New Hampshire likely has little impact on the ecosystem; they will never reach a density level where they could become a pest the way deer, for instance, have. Similarly, he says, "if we lose bobcats, the sky's not going to fall. It's not even going to get cloudy. We're just going to feel bad."

Yet his respect and admiration for the animals is immense. "The bobcat is an obvious emblem of all that's good about nature," he says. "It's an animal that just exemplifies wild. To have it still in our neighborhood is wonderful."

Learn more about Understanding Bobcats in the Granite State, a cooperative project of the University of New Hampshire and New Hampshire Fish & Game Department, at http://mlitvaitis.unh.edu/research/bobcatweb/bobcats.htm. View a video of the researchers trapping and collaring a bobcat at http://vimeo.com/10801715.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

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Photographs available to download:
http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2010/apr/bp13bobcat_01.jpg
http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2010/apr/bp13bobcat_02.jpg
Caption: Adult male bobcat in Bow.
Credit: Diane Lowe.

http://unh.edu/news/cj_nr/2010/apr/bp13bobcat_03.jpg
Caption: UNH graduate student Derek Broman with the first collared bobcat of the study, a 30-pound male captured Nov. 22, 2009 in Gilsum.
Credit: Greg Elizondo.

http://www.unh.edu/news/images/downloads/_cat.jpg
Caption: Although it wasn't part of this study, the UNH wildcat (a generic category that includes bobcats) is a fine specimen of a bobcat, says UNH professor John Litvaitis. "I'd say it's a 24-pound female, about three years old, that's not going to take any guff from any other animal in the neighborhood," he says.

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